Reviewer’s report

Title: Evolution of Wenger's Concept of Community of Practice

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Reviewer: Stephen Manske

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This review was completed by Steve Manske, Melissa Roth and Barbara Riley, University of Waterloo.

While a critical appraisal of the evolution of the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) is a good idea and a potentially valuable contribution, the paper in its current form has several challenges that need to be resolved prior to publication. Having said that, the main ideas within the paper are reasonable to the extent they are described. One general theme in the paper, for example, revolves around being able to distinguish what is and is not a CoP and how to harness the value of the CoP. The authors state, for example, “it is less clear on how to foster the three elements at the early stage.” We strongly support such claims. While a theory / framework that is open to evolution has value, we recommend greater specificity in the analytic framework used to compare and contrast the different conceptualizations, leading to a synthesis that may point to greater precision and discernment of the CoP concept; that is, “Will the real CoP description please stand up?”

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. Purpose of the paper and discussion to suit this purpose. The overall objective of the paper is unclear, and begs the question of ‘to what end’? To our way of thinking it would be effective to identify promising directions emerging from the critique. Yet the discussion leaves us lacking any clear sense of where to head besides seeking greater precision.

   a. We need a better sense of the urgency for the health field to understand (and potentially utilize) CoP, beyond concerns that CoP is being used. Would an example from the health field contribute? How might the concepts contribute to improved care / evidence informed knowledge use? Are there potential downsides (for example, the mutually negotiated CoP joint enterprise could be to become efficient – as opposed to producing quality work. That choice, has potential to jeopardize quality for efficiency).

2. Methodology: Essentially, the authors have completed a systematic review of literature around the CoP concept. (If it is not a systematic review, then they need to justify why not). The paper lacks the specificity needed to judge the adequacy of the systematic review implementation. While the authors may argue that word limits prevent them from addressing all of the following, they need to provide a better foundation for their critique of CoP.
a. The review lacked a critical appraisal framework. What were the questions guiding the critical analysis?

b. What were inclusion and exclusion criteria for the sources used? Was there any sifting of the articles after the initial search? i.e., how were inclusion/exclusion criteria applied?

c. Was there any critique of the quality of the articles? If we’re using other authors’ work to critique the evolution of CoP, there should be some sense that the new authors are really subscribing to the same framework as Wenger et al. proposed and espoused. For example, the paper critiques Orr’s ethnographic study, in which Orr uses a different term to describe the group formed. It appears, the group didn’t necessarily adhere to a basic tenet of CoP (i.e., mutually determined joint enterprise). Thus, the critique might have emphasised the inappropriate use of the CoP framework. This criticism would fit well with the authors’ notion that what is, and what is not a CoP is difficult to establish since there are no validated measures. To their credit, the authors do suggest that Willmott’s application of CoP terminology is so imprecise as to render the concept useless.

d. How was information extracted from the sources? Who was involved in the summarization of concepts put forth in the reviewed literature? Were there validity and reliability checks included?

e. What were the results of the systematic search? For instance, we don’t know the total number of retrieved articles or how these were sifted. It appears that some “additional” articles have been added for the critique, but we don’t know who or why. That is, there is no “results” section, however brief.

3. Discussion needs to better point where the field can and should head.

a. What research issues might need to be addressed? Do we need more primary studies in the field of health? What should they address? The field needs more concrete direction. According the authors’ critique of the evolution of CoP, we may not be heading in the right direction, but we don’t yet have the tools to discern what works and what doesn’t from CoP. For instance, the description of Wenger et al.’s 14 indicators made a useful “factor analysis”, but does the field really need more specifics and concrete descriptions of critical elements of CoP.

b. How does this critique help us to grasp the concrete elements of CoP, so that we can discern whether and how it might be a useful concept to apply, in the end, leading to improved health outcomes and lowered costs?

Minor Essential Revisions

4. The paper contains several minor grammatical glitches, typically in adding or not adding “s” to nouns and verbs, as in the following examples: “spreading the words about the group”;

5. The paper could benefit from a good edit.
6. Words are used without appropriate definition (e.g. grassroots).

Discretionary Revisions

None

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.